

Vogelzang, with Arianne the chicken,  
in Proef's Amsterdam studio.



Photo by Anna Collinge

# YOU ARE WHAT YOU EAT

Christopher Kanak talks to conceptual food artist [Marije Vogelzang](#), the inventive mind behind Dutch food studio Proef, who thinks eating is all about interacting with your environment.

I use whatever it takes, whatever I need to communicate my ideas about eating,' says Marije Vogelzang, artist, product designer, sculptor, party organiser and chef. 'I call myself an eating designer,' she tells me, explaining why she wants to explore new ways to experience food. 'There are so many designers that make clothes to wear, cars to drive, houses to live in and everything,' she says. 'What is the closest you can get to human beings?' she asks. 'Food.'

'Most design is quite boring and just exists to sell more products,' says Vogelzang. 'If you have a creative mind then you should add something more positive instead of adding more stuff.'

Instead of trying to find out what kind of designer the 29-year old is, it's a lot more rewarding to discover who she is through her work. For a recent Droog design collective dinner, she built an abstract edible moonscape of yeast-free pizza dough stretching across a series of bowls on an enormous table. As the meal progressed, the dough was softened with servings of stew so the two could be eaten together. A recent launch of a lingerie label involved her placing beribboned hors d'oeuvres on swaying rods to mimic a swarm of butterflies and tempt the guests.

Vogelzang does not like just to shape food, she creates narratives to explain why a dish tastes the way it does, where it comes from, who made it, how it was made and why you are eating it. 'Every design eventually gets thrown away, but when people eat my food it becomes part of their body,' she says of her projects, which could be seen as the end result of the evolutionary response of design to the disposable culture of the 21st century. 'My designs walk around everywhere inside people,' she reveals. 'Even when it leaves the body, the design remains in the brain as a memory.'

The mix of intelligent design, surreal storytelling and delicious food, matched with Vogelzang's lively, slightly elfin personality, has made her sought after. Her clients range from Hermès to BMW and she has lectured in places from Tokyo

to Beirut. In May, Rotterdam's MAMA gallery presented Vogelzang's first solo-exhibition. 'Fuel' was a mixture of sketches, videos animations and installations – some that you could actually eat. In October she is giving a lecture at design guru Claus Sendlinger's Design Hotels Forum in Berlin. Vogelzang is currently working on a book of her work that will be published in December.

## The Proef is in the pudding

At her restaurant in Rotterdam and studio in Amsterdam, her company Proef – meaning 'to taste' and also 'to test' – is where she creates new concepts. In March this year a Canadian TV crew made a programme about world food and chose Vogelzang to represent the Netherlands. They filmed her in her Amsterdam studio, a converted gasworks in the middle of a park, preparing dinner, an event in itself.

Food does not just communicate Vogelzang's ideas, she also likes to turn perceptions about eating inside out. In 2007, she used an empty reservoir basin to host a tasting of the Netherlands' 12 different tap waters. The National Tapwatertesting of 2007 was a spectacle. Performance is key to the way Vogelzang works. Holland's tap water, rated as some of the purest in the world, was revered like a fine wine right down to its *terroir*. They even decided on which water suited which dish – 'Amsterdam tap water goes very well with greensprouts, but if you want to eat fish fingers try the Rotterdam.' The winner was Tilburg, a southern city in Noord-Brabant. 'I think a lot of visitors came from Tilburg so they just wanted to vote for it,' she says laughing. 'It's not really fair.' Noord-Brabant might have been famous for its water, but the point about people taking it for granted was made in Proef's own, idiosyncratic way.

When simple concepts are turned on their head they often provide opportunities for profound insight. In a project for a physics conference, a wooden tree installation was covered with anglepoise lamps on which small



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coloured dough pancakes were baked. Vogelzang says she wanted to explore the process of photosynthesis. Instead of turning carbon dioxide and water into carbohydrates and oxygen using sunlight, she turned electric light into crispy edible leaves by baking dough on the lightbulbs

### Eating as art

The first Proef opened in Rotterdam in 2004. It serves food with a conceptual approach. Vogelzang moved to Amsterdam in 2006 and opened her second Proef, a studio where she works on her projects and which she occasionally rents out as a banqueting space. She currently has 25 people working for her, including a cook and a business manager. If you visit Proef you can get involved in her eccentric creations and eat salads whose ingredients were grown in the dark.

Born in Enschede in the eastern Netherlands, Vogelzang was not brought up to be a foodie, but she became interested in food as a material while studying industrial design at the Design Academy Eindhoven in 1995. She was taught by Dutch design guru Li Edelkoort who regularly uses food in her work and has been a big influence on the eating designer scene. 'I was doing experiments with lots of materials and new ways of thinking and designing and conceptualising,' she says of her time at Eindhoven. 'While I was working with ceramics and sometimes hair or plants, I was also spending a lot of my time in my kitchen because I love cooking and so it just came naturally.'

For her final year project at the Academy, Vogelzang designed a funeral. Everything was white – the food, which was fish, rice, potatoes

by what food does to a person not only physically but also emotionally.' In a joint project with the Historical Museum of Rotterdam, Vogelzang recreated a meal for World War II veterans that consisted of food that many of the soldiers hadn't eaten since then, complete with ration cards. The emotional attachment to the food was matched by reanimated 40s attitudes to eating. 'It brought back memories from that time when they ate the food,' she explains. 'It was very painful, of course, but also really important for me to understand that this is the one material that is the closest to people, much closer than dead material like wood.'

Humour always bring people together at the table. At one dinner Vogelzang organised, she cut the plates in half. On some plates she placed two servings of Parma ham, on others two servings of melon. Without instructions she let the guests discover that if they want to have a full meal, they would have to share half-plates. This achieved what Vogelzang wanted – everyone eating and interacting together.

Vogelzang is both serious and playful, at once concerned with the environment while at the same time mischievous. At the 'Fuel' exhibition she displayed large hanging sausages, each one covered in a lovingly sewn hand-knitted cosy. She made a mass-produced product, which was indistinguishable from the pig it once was, individual again. At the moment she is working on a Borges-esque project to create imaginary animals using tofu.

Other food concepts reveal intriguing dualities. In order to dispel the negative associations that children might have with healthy food, Vogelzang devised an entirely new way for them to relate to eating based around Leonardo da Vinci's colour wheel. Each colour is given a different



'TABLECLOTHS WERE REVERSED SO THEY WENT ROUND GUESTS' NECKS, NOT THEIR LAPS.'

and almonds, and even the clothing. 'I did it because I thought it was fun,' she says. 'I think that food has healing qualities and sharing food brings people together.'

The white funeral was an anti-traditional experience that retained the ritual. Vogelzang created a serene environment, where mourners were encouraged to interact and celebrate a life. 'In Holland the colour of a funeral is black,' she explains. 'You go there and you dress in black and you put your sad face on and get a cup of coffee and a slice of sponge cake or a Dutch white bun. It's a sad story, especially if you look at other parts of the world where there are big feasts. Food is a very important factor in mourning so I made this alternative for people who want something more than a sponge cake.' Vogelzang finds difficult emotional situations create the most interesting results when combined with food, although 'we also do weddings', she says.

After her graduation, Vogelzang created concepts including a meal comprising 'forgotten vegetables' for a Droog exhibition in Lille and a buffet of 'emotion food' – strongly flavoured dishes tattooed with evocative words to provoke particular feelings – for the opening of Jongerius Lab's Ideal House at the Cologne Furniture Fair. 'I just did what I intuitively thought I had to do,' she says, but admits she was initially reluctant, thinking she would be pigeonholed. 'Now I see that I can still make the tables because I need the tables for food and I can make ceramics and anything else,' she says. 'It has actually made me richer.'

### Mood food

The emotional associations that food evokes make it an ideal tool for therapy. 'Food memories are so strong,' she says. 'I am really fascinated

emotional association. For example orange is happy. Children would pick food of the colour they felt at the time.

People are central to Vogelzang's designs. Her ability to bring them together has not gone unnoticed in some divided parts of the world. Lebanon is one. The assassination of former Lebanese premier Rafik Hariri in February 2005, and the war between Hezbollah and Israel in 2006, opened up still-raw wounds from the days of the civil war in the 1980s. In February 2008, Kamal Mouzawak, the founder of Souk el Tayeb, Beirut's farmer's market, asked Vogelzang to devise an experience that would bring divided communities together and encourage locals from all backgrounds to rediscover Lebanon's rich culinary culture. Instead of devising an experience herself she asked the locals to create their own.

Twenty five people from very different backgrounds were brought together to make bowls and were asked to write their personal food story or food memory on them. The bowls were baked and presented at the Saturday market as part of a 10m-long 'green line', named after the civil war demarcation line, and served with fresh white cheese and Cedar honey. Barriers were enthusiastically eaten away.

Vogelzang's belief in the constructive benefits that eating design can bring to society means that her work is now centred around social and educational projects. However, what gives her concepts such a spark is because she touched something special and intangible. Perhaps the Dutch designer is awakening a sixth sense in our appreciation of food. 'I really think the person who eats my food is part of the design,' she says. 'It is not finished when the table is set. It's finished when it is done, when the people eat the food and go home. Maybe then it's not even finished.' ■